

## 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday OT - (Year A) – September 3, 2017

JER 20:7-9; PS 63:2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9; ROM 12:1-2; MT 16:21-27

When a man and woman are preparing for **Sacramental Marriage**, they will very likely hear, *many times*—from **family** or **friends**, from their **priest** or their **parents**—that *married life is hard*. Some couple's eyes glaze over when they hear this because they're so **confident** in their commitment to one another that, while they recognize the **wisdom** in the warning, and appreciate the **concern** shown by their loved ones, they don't *really* believe it applies to **them**. “**All those other couples—sure they're going to have challenges—but we won't because...well... we're in love.**” Famous last words!

The same holds true for **men** entering the **seminary**, or **men and women** entering religious life in the **monastery** or **convent**. The inspiration that started them on the path of discernment very likely filled their hearts with images of **holy heroism**—*praying, serving others and living in intimate personal communion with Jesus*—to the point that warnings about the difficulties that are part of such a vocation pale in comparison to their romantic dreams of saintly exploits. Until, of course, their vocation is put to the test.

The same is true for **converts to Catholicism** who enter the **RCIA** process—*the program of instruction and initiation for adults seeking to become Catholic*. Every year, the new crop of would-be Catholics is warned by **priests, catechists, friends** and **other converts** that they will face difficult spiritual trials that can rattle their resolve. They're told to prepare for bouts of **discouragement, fear** and **doubt**, stirred up by the *devil*, who desperately works to keep them as far from Jesus and his Church as possible. They nod, politely, but too often, the warning doesn't *really* register. Then, when they face their first spiritual trial, they're ready to abandon RCIA and return to their former way of life.

The common denominator in these scenarios is **overconfidence** in one's own commitment, and the **failure** to surrender fully to God.

The *inspiration* to use our God-given gifts for something bigger than ourselves comes from the same God who gave us **those gifts** in the first place. But that inspiration too often takes a back seat to our own ideas and plans, causing our **blind self-confidence** and **stubborn self-reliance** to undermine the holy inspiration that started us on the path toward our vocation. We begin to think we know better than

God—and we get angry at him when his ways don't conform with our ways...when *God* doesn't think as we **human beings** do.

Two individuals in today's readings demonstrate this dynamic—**Jeremiah** and **Peter**.

Let's consider first the **Prophet Jeremiah**. The tension in his words in the 1<sup>st</sup> Reading is **palpable**. But, to understand **why** Jeremiah felt that God “**duped**” him, we need to know the details of God's conversation with Jeremiah when he first called Jeremiah to be a prophet.

God told Jeremiah he had appointed him a prophet even before he was born. Jeremiah tried to talk his way out of it. God **insisted**...and then **encouraged** Jeremiah with these words:

***Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you—[says] the LORD.*** (Jer 1:8)

Then the Lord put *his own words* into the prophet's mouth, and also told him **who** he would be **confronting** and **what** he was to **proclaim**. And then he spoke these words to Jeremiah to bolster his confidence.

***...prepare yourself; stand up and tell them all that I command you. Do not be terrified on account of them, or I will terrify you before them; for I am the one who today makes you a fortified city, a pillar of iron, a wall of bronze, against the whole land: Against Judah's kings and princes, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but not prevail over you, for I am with you to deliver you—[says] the LORD.*** (Jer 1:17-19)

Now this very last thing God said to Jeremiah **here** holds the key to understanding *why* Jeremiah felt duped:

***They will fight against you, but not prevail over you, for I am with you to deliver you—[says] the LORD.*** (Jer 1:17-19)

God, indeed, told Jeremiah that his adversaries would not prevail over him, but Jeremiah seemed to miss what God said right *before* that: “**They will fight against you.**” In other words, “***You're going to have a battle on your hands***”. Jeremiah

was assured of ultimate victory, and he accepted the call—reluctantly—but he seems to have resented God when the going got tough—very tough—even though God **had** been up-front with him from the start.

Jeremiah eventually discovered that his effectiveness in serving God came precisely as a result of the **trials** and **tribulations** that he *endured* in carrying out his mission. God was not *only* there to **be with** Jeremiah and to **deliver** him. He was also there to *form* Jeremiah to be an influential prophet for his people. God’s word, and the mission he had given to Jeremiah, were so much a part of Jeremiah by that point, that he would be opposing **himself** were he to resist it. This is evident in Jeremiah’s own words:

*I say I will not mention him, I will no longer speak in his name. But then it is as if fire is burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding back, I cannot!* (Jer 20:9)

The sufferings he endured had led to an intimacy with God that Jeremiah could not see...*as it was developing*.

Now, if Jeremiah still fell into discouragement and despair even after God had spoken with him *directly*, then we shouldn’t be too surprised when the **newly married** who are struggling; or the **seminarian** or the **novice religious sister** who are doubting their vocation; or the **convert** in RCIA who is ready to throw in the towel on this whole “**Catholic thing**”; feel like they made a **bad choice**, or that God has **let them down**, when things are not going smoothly.

This is not only true of average folk, like you and me, but it is also true of those who become **saints**.

Take **Fr. John Vianney**, for instance. He was a French priest born in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century who, because of academic struggles, was **only** ordained because of the insistence of those few who recognized his holiness even as they acknowledged his failures in his studies. They could see something **special**—something *supernatural*—at work in this young seminarian that could not be measured by mere academic standards.

When Fr. Vianney was assigned as pastor of a parish in a tiny French village called Ars, he knew he was in over his head. And yet, his love for God and for his people

transformed him into a priest *so holy*, and *so influential* for the souls entrusted to him, that he is now the *Patron Saint of all priests*.

But his transformation from **academically-challenged seminarian** to *saint* did not happen overnight. As a priest, he faced fierce opposition from the **townspeople** and even from many of his own **parishioners**. He also faced direct and incessant attacks from the **devil**. So great were his trials that he tried—on multiple occasions—to abandon his parish under cover of darkness hoping to spend the rest of his life secluded in prayer in a monastery. Late in his holy life, Fr. Vianney said:

**“If on my arrival at Ars I had seen all that I was to suffer there, I should have died on the spot.”**

If God were to show us—**up front**—the exact nature and specific details of our sufferings, then *nobody* would *ever* follow his call—whether to **marriage**, or **consecrated service** to the Church or, for that matter, **conversion** to Catholicism.

Now, let’s shift our focus to the Gospel and consider **Peter’s** interactions with Jesus, because we can see in Peter’s **impulsiveness** why **St. Paul** wrote these words to the **Romans** in our **2<sup>nd</sup> Reading**:

*Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.* (Rom 12:2)

In other words, don’t let your **mind** and **conscience** be *formed* by what *passes* for wisdom in the prevailing human culture—now or in any other age—but let **God’s wisdom transform** you so that you can live out your personal vocation to the full, **winning souls** for Christ...and **giving glory** to God the Father.

In this **Letter to the Romans**, Paul **warns** of the danger of putting human considerations over God’s will. In the Gospel, Peter unwittingly *demonstrates what it looks like* when we give priority to human folly over God’s wisdom.

In last week’s Gospel, after Peter proclaimed Jesus to be the *“Messiah, the Son of the living God”* (cf. Mt 16:16), Jesus assured Peter that he had received *that* inspiration directly from his **Father** in heaven. Peter’s openness to God’s inspiration was why Jesus entrusted him with leadership of his Church.

In the **very next section** of Matthew’s Gospel—*the part we heard proclaimed today*—Jesus warned the disciples that he would suffer and die a gruesome death... but rise from the dead. Instantly, Peter does an about-face from last week’s Gospel. Instead of openness to divine inspiration, Peter *reprimanded* Jesus!

*[Jesus] turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.”* (Mt 16:23)

Peter didn’t *consciously* set out to oppose Jesus. Peter became afraid because he was naturally averse to the suffering Jesus described. He did not—he *could* not at that point—comprehend that **attaining glory** meant **enduring the passion**. He could only see things from his limited human point-of-view, and Jesus knew that Peter and the other disciples needed much more **spiritual formation** to be able to endure the suffering—first **his**, and then *their own*—that preceded the glory.

So, Jesus began the **advanced formation lesson** for his followers with these words:

*“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.* (Mt 16:24)

Like the selective hearing of Jeremiah, too many of us Christians only hear the “**follow me**” part and gloss over the “**deny**” and “**take up the cross**” part.

In his mercy, the Lord allows us to experience **only** what we’re prepared to experience up to the point in our vocation that we’ve actually reached. That’s his **mercy**. But he also warns us that we **will** have tribulation when we follow him. That’s his **justice**. Yet...he promises not only to be **with** us...he not only promises to **deliver** us. He promises to *form* us into the saints he has created us to be...**provided** we trust him enough to take the first step into a future that we **cannot** predict.

The author of the **Book of Sirach** sums up this whole dynamic beautifully:

*My child, when you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for trials. Be sincere of heart and steadfast, and do not be impetuous in time of adversity. Cling to him, do not leave him, that you may prosper in your last days. Accept whatever happens to you; in periods of humiliation be patient. For in fire gold is tested, and the chosen, in the crucible of humiliation. Trust in God, and he will help you; make*

*your ways straight and hope in him. You that fear the Lord, wait for his mercy, do not stray lest you fall. You that fear the Lord, trust in him, and your reward will not be lost. You that fear the Lord, hope for good things, for lasting joy and mercy.*

(Sirach 2:1-9)

Jesus gives us the specific details of *our personal vocations* on a “**need to know**” basis. He knows **what** we need to know and *when*—what we **can** handle at any given moment and what we **cannot**.

His **timing** is perfect.

His **will** is perfect.

His **love** is perfect.

What more do we *need* to know than **that**?